

## **The Politics of School Lunch in Hawai`i**

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### **Abstract**

School lunch reform is taking place at many different levels, from the legislature, to certain school lunch personnel, down to parents at individual schools. How did school lunch develop differently in Hawai`i from that found in the continental United States? The Hawai`i DOE 5 week cycle menu has remained unchanged for the past 30 plus years. It still has a high fat content, uses agricultural commodity surplus meat and dairy in every meal, and includes little fresh produce. This article uses qualitative methods to examine the implications for children's health and behavior in the classroom, along with the institutional barriers to school lunch reform in Hawai'i.

### **Introduction**

For the last two years, every third Thursday, I have been going down to Sunset Beach Elementary School (SBES), on the island of O`ahu to serve the Fresh Choice Salad Bar to about three hundred elementary schoolchildren eating school lunch. After several years as an active parent advocating for better school food on the School Community Council at SBES and with the help of the Kokua Hawai`i Foundation, a local non-profit organization we were able to convince the school administration, as well as the School Food Services supervisor and kitchen staff that the SBES children would not only enjoy, but also nutritionally benefit from the addition of fresh fruits and vegetables to their school lunches, at least once a week. This improved nutrition improves the students' capacity to concentrate in class after lunch, leading to a better classroom experience for both students and teachers. While there is no data available on the potential correlation between test scores and salad bar participation, preliminary anecdotal teacher interviews suggest that overall classroom behavior shows a slight improvement on salad bar days.

This paper proposes to examine the successes and challenges of the school lunch program in Hawai`i's public schools to determine whether we are on track to make beneficial changes to the school menu for Hawai`i school children, in several respects: nutritionally, environmentally, and programmatically. Using qualitative interview methods, I investigated the issues surrounding school lunch in Hawai`i, comparing it to the existing literature on the same topic in the mainland United States. I discuss the current status of school lunch in Hawai`i, and through a narrative analysis of my interviewees' responses, explore the successes and challenges faced by activists, school food services supervisors, and kitchen staff in negotiating the difficult process of improving school lunch in Hawai`i.

### **History of School Lunch Program in Hawai`i**

During the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wealthy white sugar plantation owners started importing laborers from Asia, starting with Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and eventually Filipino workers to do the hard labor required to plant, harvest and export large amounts of Hawai`i grown sugar cane to the mainland United States and beyond (Takaki, 1983). While initially, most of these laborers came by themselves and stayed

single, others eventually came with families, or themselves imported picture brides from their home countries to come to Hawai`i and start families. The descendants of these imported laborers caused an influx of school children into Hawai`i's schools at the same time as the number of children of Hawaiian descent was declining due to death and disease. Many plantations had small schools on the premises, especially to teach the children English, which for the most part was not spoken at home, so that they would become effective plantation laborers themselves when they came of age to follow in their parents' footsteps. Most children came prepared with a packed lunch from home, and many ethnic groups kept to themselves, encouraged by the plantation owners to isolate themselves from other groups, in order to prevent any concerted labor efforts to organize and strike across ethnic groups for better wages and/or working conditions. However, people working together side by side in difficult conditions eventually learned to communicate with each other, developing Pidgin English to do so, and "talking story" over shared food. This improved communication led to two major multiethnic strikes (1920, 1924) which did improve wages and conditions, and eventually allowed more families to move out of the paternalistic plantation system and into towns with regular public schools (Takaki 1983). These former plantation workers started multitudes of small businesses in areas all across the main islands, and continued to struggle to provide for their families, but at least they were no longer beholden to the plantation owners for their livelihoods.

The public schools in these Hawai`i settlements started to grow, both in size and in number. Following the policies on the mainland United States, by the middle of the twentieth century, there was a school lunch program geared toward making sure that schoolchildren had access to at least one filling, hot meal per day. In Hawai`i, that lunch was also cooked with ethnically and culturally appropriate food. Thus, many of the school lunch recipes contained a high level of fat, and every single meal contained meat of one kind or another. Many of the recipes remain the same, yet as a state, we have followed the national trend toward high numbers of obese children, especially in Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander populations, which are genetically and socioeconomically at risk for a host of obesity related diseases such as high blood pressure, heart disease, and most importantly diabetes (Hanashiro and Ceria-Ulep, 2011). Nutritionally, the recipes from the middle of the twentieth century are no longer appropriate to the needs of today's children who are much more sedentary and no longer labor on the plantations, yet School Food Services (SFS) in Hawai`i has yet to substantively change its policies and menus to reflect these new dietary needs.

## **Literature Review**

There is a dearth of academic literature on school lunch in Hawai`i. This project addresses this deficiency. Though the topic has been addressed a few times by O`ahu's alternative weekly newspaper, the *Honolulu Weekly*, there is much more academic literature available on school lunch in the mainland United States. The two most recent and exhaustive histories and reviews of the National School Lunch Program were Janet Poppendieck's *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America* (2010) and Susan Levine's *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America's Favorite Welfare Program* (2010). These two books provided an assessment of the current status of school food in the America, focusing on the history and politics of the school lunch program, as well as the implications of the privatization of school food services in cafeterias nationwide. Marion Nestle's 2003 *Food Politics* briefly discussed the influence of marketing on school children, discussing the impact of private companies offering fast food to children as well as the politics and lobbying geared toward influencing school districts to allow certain large soda companies what she termed "pouring rights" to serve soda in schools both at lunch and in vending machines (Nestle, 2003). However, this book is somewhat outdated given that much of the country (including Hawai`i) is now on track to eliminating any soda and even sports drink availability in schools due to pressure from parents and popular media scrutiny about the negative effects of soda on children's weight and negative effects on educational achievement due to wildly fluctuating levels of

sugar intake leading to the inability of students to concentrate in class after drinking a soda (or the readily available chocolate milk for that matter). In *Lunch Lessons: Changing the Way we Feed our Children* (2007), Ann Cooper and Lisa Holmes discussed procurement issues surrounding school food in various school districts, and focused on offering Cooper's "home" district of Boulder Colorado as a model for the implementation of changes to school food services to revert back to scratch cooking through re-training of the cafeteria staff, educating children about nutrition, and offering recipes for tasty food that children are likely to eat at school. Most recently, Amy Kalafa's book entitled *Lunch Wars: How to Start a School Food Revolution and Win the Battle for our Children's Health* (2011) provided parents and activists with a step-by-step guide to changing school food around the nation, again modeled after Kalafa's successful efforts in her children's own school. These last two books however, were relatively light on the academic analysis, instead focusing more on activism and its practical applications.

Cora Peterson's 2011 article in *Food Policy* detailed the negative effects of the inconsistencies of the commodity reimbursement system whereby schools receive in-kind food funding for certain commodities in order to cook certain meals. Mirtcheva and Powell analyzed stigma for participation in the School Lunch program as evidenced by peer to peer ridicule for buying school lunches in various neighborhoods (2009). This article found that a higher rate of participation in the free and reduced school lunch program was directly correlated with higher peer stigma for eating school lunch. Bhatia, Jones and Reicker analyzed the increase in school lunch participation when competitive (fast) foods were eliminated in a pilot project in San Francisco in their 2011 article in the *American Journal of Public Health*. Finally, in their 2010 article "Childhood obesity and schools: Evidence from the National Survey of Children's Health," Li and Hooker argued that even though they used a small sample, the results of their study linked higher Body Mass Index in children eligible for free and reduced school lunches, linking low socioeconomic status with higher rates of obesity. This wide variety of perspectives on school lunches from policy, to health, to politics all point in one direction: the school lunch system is broken and needs to be fixed in a substantial number of ways.

Hawai`i is no different than the rest of the nation in this respect, and follows the same devastating trends in high rates of obesity for certain ethnic and socioeconomic groups. However, we are unique in a variety of other ways, detailed below, which highlight the importance of this project. While there is no documented academic literature on Hawai`i's school lunch issues, as mentioned above, there is quite a bit of popular literature devoted to the issue as well as a large popular cultural attention dedicated to school lunch issues on the mainland United States. The attention paid to superstar chef Alice Waters' Edible Schoolyard in Berkeley, California, was instrumental in bringing attention to this issue, especially among urban, wealthy elites (Atkins Center for Weight and Health, 2010). Furthermore, Jamie Oliver's television series *Food Revolution* both in Huntington, West Virginia and Los Angeles, California brought widespread attention to the challenges faced by school districts everywhere to change school food to more nutritious, less processed, and hopefully better-tasting food for our school children (Oliver, 2011). This attention has led to a huge political movement, made up of mostly women (though certainly not all) activists themselves getting involved with school food issues as extensions of their roles as mothers.

## **Methods**

While the Hawai`i state government is regulated by Sunshine Laws to promote government transparency and accountability (Hawai`i Office of Information Practices, 2012), somehow, the Hawai`i Department of Education (HI DOE), and especially the School Food Services (SFS) branch seem exempt (Cocke, 2011). An examination of the Hawai`i school food website reveals little more than a link to the Office of Child and Nutrition Services website. There is very little substantive information on the website that is accessible to interested parties. In another attempt to find information about SFS in Hawai`i, a legislative request from a Farm-to-School task force for HI DOE procurement procedures went unanswered (UH

Feasibility Study, 2009). Therefore, the methods for this project focused on open-ended interviews with cafeteria staff, School Food Services supervisors, as well as activists working on school food issues in Hawai'i. I interviewed six people involved with school food services in various capacities: 1) the Windward District supervisor for the island of O'ahu, 2) three cafeteria staff from three elementary schools around O'ahu representing different geographic areas and demographic characteristics, and 3) two activists from the Kokua Hawai'i Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to improving agricultural literacy and nutrition education, along with making substantive changes to school lunches in Hawai'i. The interviews lasted between twenty minutes at the shortest and two and half hours at the longest. Each interviewee signed and retained one of two copies of an informed consent form.

### **Status of School Lunch in Hawai'i**

The Hawai'i Department of Education is a single, seven-island system serving approximately 181,213 children in 255 public schools not including charter schools (Hawai'i DOE Enrollment Report, 2011). The school food services branch distributes about 100,000-125,000 school lunches each day (Interview, Egi, December 16, 2011) and is the 10<sup>th</sup> largest school food authority in the nation with an \$82 million budget (Hawai'i Food Service Toolkit, 2011). There is a five week cycle menu with the same recipes recycled over and over again which has remained essentially unchanged for the last thirty some odd years. Within that time period however, many of the foods that were originally cooked from scratch have turned into pre-made, processed foods which cost more from the vendors, but reduce labor costs in Hawai'i's cafeterias.

As with cafeterias on the mainland, School Food Services receives commodity shipments from the federal government through the Department of Defense. However, while mainland cafeterias receive a variety of surplus commodities, Hawai'i schools only receive rice, sugar, ground beef, turkey meat, cheese, canned fruits and flour which only constitute about 10% of the cost of the meal (Interview, Egi, December 16, 2011). Since Hawai'i is in the middle of the North Pacific, storage of commodity foods adds to the HI DOE's food costs, so the free food isn't so free after all (Interview, Kishida, December 9, 2011). Therefore, importing large quantities of commodities to Hawai'i has not been found to be as cost efficient as procuring foods on an as needed basis through procurement contracts negotiated by the Department of Defense.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) reimbursement rates are based on each lunch served needing to have at least three of the five components of a school lunch in order to qualify for reimbursement ("Offer vs. Serve Resource Guide," 2012). The offer (children get a choice of menu items) versus serve (the lunches are already pre-made and the children have no choices as to what goes on their plates) dichotomy presents a host of additional issues. For example, on an "offer" program meatball lunch day, a child could conceivably walk away with three meatballs, some rice, and a chocolate milk to qualify for reimbursement. This lunch would consist of protein, starch and dairy, and thus meets the minimum of three items from the five possible school lunch components. Furthermore, the same lunch on a "serve" program, might also include canned peaches in syrup and some iceberg lettuce contributing to additional sugar intake beyond the chocolate milk's own 26 grams of sugar for an 8 ounce quantity. Finally, that lunch may get wasted and thrown in the trash can uneaten since none of the items are all that appealing to begin with.

### **School Lunch Successes in Hawai'i**

At the individual school level, there have been some major successes in improving the quality of school lunches in Hawai'i, as well as including more fresh fruits and vegetables on the regular menu. Moanalua Elementary School was a leader in showing other schools that implementing salad bars could be done

within the required budget and to satisfy all types of appetites. Cafeteria manager Bobby Chinaka used to serve 8-12 salad bar items each day, but when he lost two positions due to budget cuts, he had to terminate the salad bar option for his school, despite great opposition from students, parents, and staff. He argued that having the salad bar prevented waste and encouraged children to eat healthy fresh produce. He lamented the fact that the budget cuts made him "no longer different, no longer unique" (Interview, Chinaka, March 8, 2012). When speaking about the salad bar, Chinaka became extremely passionate: "with the salad bar, kids learn about food, sanitation, and not wasting food because you learn how food is precious because it took you that long to grow it" (Interview, Chinaka, March 8, 2012). Chinaka was able to save money by cutting waste and introducing kids to new produce they no longer know, even though Hawai`i had a long-standing tradition of self-sufficiency, dating back to the ancient Hawaiians. He took advantage of the flexibility allowed by SFS to create a good working environment for his staff, to develop a loyal following from staff, students, and parents, and to include healthy foods on his menu with as many local options as possible.

Four interviewees explained that for some kids, school lunch is the only hot meal they get in a day because they don't have access to wholesome foods at home. It stands to reason then, that school lunch is also the only access some children have to fresh whole fruits and vegetables as well, since it is likely that many of their dinners consist of fast food. Two of my respondents who have worked in Hawai`i cafeterias for a total of over sixty years combined argued that with the sagging economy, many parents in Hawai`i work two jobs due to the high cost of living, and that they are told by their student monitors that they eat fast food five or six times per week. Their parents have no time to prepare healthy foods from scratch, and tend to "grab something on the way home from work" (Interviews: Chinaka, March 8, 2012; Miyata, March 12, 2012). This trend is certainly not isolated to Hawai`i, though I argue that the high cost of living there exacerbates the problem and that parents may *want* to prepare wholesome foods for their children, but that having two (or more) jobs prevents them from doing so.

### **School Lunch Challenges**

There is a resistance to change in the HI DOE that is applicable to the school lunch menu in many ways. First, the attitude of School Food Services management, at least as seen from the kitchen managers, the cafeteria staff, and the activists themselves seems to be that "what has been done for decades is working just fine" (Interview, Kishida, December 9, 2011) so there is little incentive to make any large scale changes. The lack of policy enforcement in terms of wellness policies, as well as menu and recipe changes is also a road block to change. The stringent food safety rules and regulations prevent direct farm-to-school sales, so that children are not able to eat the foods they grow in their own school gardens in the cafeteria, and kitchens are not allowed to accept produce from individual farmers who may be willing to bypass distributors and vendors to provide locally grown produce to school cafeterias because they are not necessarily food safety certified. Activists and SFS officials both argue that the supply of locally grown produce is not high enough to meet the demands of 100,000-125,000 school meals each day nor does the kitchen staff have time to research local farms and produce availability (Interview, Miyata, March 12, 2012).

A feasibility study commissioned by the Hawai`i State Legislature (UH Feasibility Study 2009) found that the agricultural production and farmer distribution capabilities in Hawai`i were not sufficient to supply all of Hawai`i's schools with produce on a regular basis. However, this presumes an "all or nothing" approach that does not allow for smaller farm-to-school programs to flourish (UH Feasibility Study, 2009). One of the key components of the barriers to change is the sheer size of the HI DOE, and that Hawai`i's island geography in and of itself makes things more difficult than they would be in a mainland school district of a similar size that was not surrounded by the Pacific Ocean.

## Conclusion

Because the HI DOE is one (very large) school district, it would seem like a single signature expressing the political will to make alterations to the school lunch program from the SFS director could potentially change everything for the better. However, there are many extenuating factors that have proven to be barriers to the improvement of school lunch in Hawai`i. These are as follows:

- 1) Budget cuts necessitating furloughs for cafeteria workers;
- 2) Inadequate facilities preventing staff training for "from scratch" cooking;
- 3) The sheer size of a school district spanning seven islands surrounded by the Pacific Ocean;
- 4) Agricultural issues concerning the availability of produce supply for SFS demand and feasibility of their distribution;
- 5) Resistance from cafeteria workers to go above and beyond their job descriptions when they have been furloughed and lost wages due to budget cuts;

Given the data generated by the interviews for this project, these five issues among others, seem like the biggest obstacles faced by Hawai`i schools to implementing changes in the school lunch program.

There are so many barriers to improvement for Hawai`i school lunches that the task of coming up with solutions or creative ideas that are likely to be implemented is extremely daunting. That said, each interviewee, from the lowest ranked kitchen staff I interviewed to the SFS supervisor overseeing more than fifty school cafeterias all pointed in the direction of the political lobbying savvy of the School Food Services Director. Two cafeteria managers and their supervisor all argued that the director has to be very political, and claimed that the School Food Services Director needs to lobby for the program in order to receive more money for School Food Services (Interviews: Chinaka, March 8, 2012; Egi, December 16, 2011; Kishida, December 9, 2011; Miyata, March 12, 2012). Each interviewee was aware that with tight budgets, directors of each government branch have to be activists for their respective programs and they were unsure that their director was doing as much as she could for them.

While understanding the political angles of this issue is certainly key to successfully changing the system within the confines of restricted budgets and programmatic resistance to change from labor, getting parents involved at the individual school level is also a critical component of securing the availability of more healthy food in Hawai`i school cafeterias. "There seems to be a lack of education about what is going on in the food revolution," said Dexter Kishida (Interview, December 9, 2011) and non-profits like the Kokua Hawai`i Foundation are attempting to redress that issue by involving parents and community members in garden and nutrition education through the school curriculum (Farm to School, 2011). They have been working at the legislative level, involving sympathetic legislators in drafting "Farm-to-School" bills that while popular, rarely get funding or enforcement capabilities. One avenue for change that has not yet been tapped is testimony and policy change at the Board of Education level, since legislative action has proven to be less than useful so far. Regardless, all parties involved acknowledge that nothing is going to happen overnight (Interview, Kishida, December 9, 2011) and that it may take an entire generation to change the system, but that if we don't take small steps now, Hawai`i will continue to be left behind in the food revolution.

Fortunately, there is hope for Hawai`i's school lunch program in that the SFS director has assembled a "rogue group" to instigate change from the inside of the system. While the director did pull the team

together, according to several interviewees, she does not have much input into day to day kitchen operations (Interviews: Chinaka, March 8, 2012; Egi, December 16, 2011; Kishida, December 9, 2011; Miyata, March 12, 2012). Perhaps this group's formation is a harbinger of positive changes to come. Requests for an interview with the SFS director for this project have thus far remained unanswered.

One potential avenue for future research/action would investigate in more depth how locally sourced foods fit into the school lunch program in Hawai'i in terms of providing a reliable institutional market for Hawai'i's agricultural products. While the size of the HI DOE does appear to be an insurmountable obstacle to the implementation of Farm-to-School programs, there would seem to be no reason *not* to try to implement either pilot projects or geographic district-wide policies that would allow for inclusion of locally sourced foods into some of Hawai'i's school food menus, even the antiquated five week cycle menu at least instead of continuing the current (failing) "all or nothing" approach. This would ensure a market for Hawai'i's farmers, reduce the state's dependence on imported foods, and provide healthy alternatives for Hawai'i's school lunches.

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